

GABRIEL CHARLES DANTE ROSSETTI AND BIRCHINGTON

Many of the people who come to Birchington every year visit the Parish Church, to see the grave of Rossetti who is buried in the Churchyard, and to see the window erected in his memory.

Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti, a poet and painter, was born in London in 1828. His father was born in Vaslo, Italy, in 1783 and became the Keeper of the Naples Museum. He left Italy in 1821 and came to England and was appointed Professor of Italian Languages at Kings College, London.

Rossetti was one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of artists formed in London in 1848, having for its object the cultivation of the methods and spirit of the early Italian – the pre-Raphaelite – painters. The group originally consisted of Holman Hunt, Millais, and Rossetti. Ford Madox Brown, Ruskin and William Morris were also in the group. They aimed at producing work in the spirit that prevailed before the time of Raphael.

Rossetti came to Birchington on 4th February 1882, a very sick man having lived much of his life in Chelsea. In 1881 his health rapidly deteriorated mainly due to drink and drugs so he spent the last few weeks of his life in the bungalow – later known as Rossetti Bungalow – situated between Beach Avenue and Rossetti Road, loaned to him by his friend John P. Seddon, the architect who designed and built the Tower Bungalows and the Bungalow Hotel. The bungalow was quite large and mainly boarded.

Rossetti's friends thought that his health would improve if he moved to the seaside. Mr. Hall Caine – the author – came with him to Birchington. In his book "Recollections of Rossetti", Hall Caine says, "Birchington was not a holiday resort in those days --- It was merely an old fashioned Kentish settlement on the edge of a hungry coast. The village stood back from the shore the better part of a mile, consisting of a quaint old Gothic church – grey and green – a winding street, a few shops, and a windmill, while the bungalow we were going to live in stood alone on the bare fields to the seaward side". Hall Caine goes on "The land around was flat and featureless, unbroken by a tree or a bush, and one felt as if the great sea in front, rising up to the horizon in a vast round hill, dominated and threatened to submerge it". He also mentions that a telescope was installed at the bungalow, and through it they could see Reculver. It is now impossible to do this because houses and high rise flats have been built between the site of the bungalow and the cliff top. When Rossetti and Hall Caine stayed in the bungalow they had a clear view of the sea from the veranda, there was nothing between the bungalow and the cliff top. Often Rossetti looked towards the cliffs to where the Beresford Hotel was built.

During the short time Rossetti stayed in Birchington he was visited by several of his friends including Mr. Frederick Shields, who designed the memorial widow in the parish church.

Early in March of 1882, Rossetti's mother, then not far off 82 years old and Christina, his sister, then 52, came to Birchington to be with him. His brother William also was with him there from time to time up to the last. Rossetti died on Easter Sunday, 9th April 1882.

He was buried in Birchington Churchyard very near to the south door of the Church. It appears to be William Rossetti's decision that he should be buried in Birchington Churchyard and not with his wife in Highgate cemetery.

The following account of his funeral appeared in Keble's Gazette – now the Isle of Thanet Gazette – of 22nd April 1882:-

"The remains of Mr. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, poet and painter, were on Friday afternoon, quietly and without ceremony, interred in the Churchyard here. At half past three the cortege consisting of the hearse and five ordinary mourning coaches left the sea side cottage where Mr. Rossetti had been staying during the past six weeks in company with his old friend, Mr. Hall Caine. The deceased was followed to his grave by his mother, his sister, Miss Christina Rossetti, his brother, Mr. William Michael Rossetti, Mrs. W. M. Rossetti, and Mr. Theodore Watts, Mr. Hall Caine and others. It had at first been intended to have a public funeral at Highgate where the wife and father of the deceased were interred, but for family reasons, this idea was abandoned. At the Churchyard wicket the procession was met by the Vicar, the Rev. J. Alcock, and the coffin, which was covered with flowers, was carried along the pathway to the church. It was of polished oak with brass fittings and bore the inscription "Dante Gabriel Rossetti, born at London, May 12, 1828, died at Birchington-on-Sea, April 9, 1882". The burial service was read by the Vicar after which the coffin covered with flowers was lowered into the grave. At the time of his death, Mr. Rossetti was engaged on a study of "Joan of Arc".

The grave is marked by a most striking white sandstone monument in the form of an ancient Irish cross, the arms and stem being connected by a circle. It was designed by his friend Ford Madox Brown. At the point of intersection of the Cross is represented the temptation in the Garden of Eden showing the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil with the serpent. The upper part of the serpent takes the form of a woman. Below shows the spiritual marriage of Dante and Beatrice. On the stem of the Cross is represented St. Luke, the patron Saint of painters, and above the Ox, the emblem of the Evangelist.

The inscription reads,

"Here sleeps
Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti
honoured under the name of
Dante Gabriel Rossetti
Among painters as a painter
and among poets as a poet
Born in London
of parentage mainly Italian 12th May 1828
Died at Birchington 9th April 1882"

His brother William wrote this inscription on the rear of the monument:

"This cruciform monument
Bespoken by Dante Rossetti's mother
Was designed by his life long friend
Ford Madox Brown
executed by J and H Pattison
and erected by his brother William
and sister Christina Rossetti".

After Dante Rossetti's death in 1882, Christina and her mother spent 9 weeks at Birchington awaiting the completion of the stained glass window to his memory – to be placed in the Church at his mother's expense.

The window was erected to the west of the south door of the Church. Christina undertook the correspondence involved in this and her letters to Mr. Frederick Shields who executed the work are models of fine tact and good feeling, and throw much light on the practical methods of the splendid old lady to whom now, as of old, debt was an enemy to grapple with untiringly. Christina wrote to Mr. Shields at the close of this episode, "It will always remain your labour of love, but my mother begs you as soon as possible to let her have an exhaustive list of her money debts to the Glass Firm and much more to yourself that she may as quickly as she can meet her liabilities".

The left light of the window is a reproduction of Rossetti's own painting of the Passover in the Royal Family and represents the two families of Joseph and Zacharias uniting to keep the Passover.

Christina in a letter to the Rev. Alcock, Vicar of Birchington describes the window thus,

"Our Lord holds the basin of blood from which the lintel is being struck with hyssop by Zacharias. One side post has already been struck close to Christ's head. His foot is being shod by John Baptist kneeling, allusive to "I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose - - -", The B.V. culls bitter herbs for the Paschal Supper for which Joseph in the background brings the lamb, being met by St. Elizabeth. Our Lord is turned in the direction of a Dove settled on brickwork near a table on which stand the vessels for supper. A vine grows up the house. A few forget-me-nots grow beside a well with bucket drawing water".

"The bitter herbs being culled by the Blessed Virgin Mary are endives – chosen because it was pictorially beautiful amongst several of the bitter herbs in question. A little bird's nest with eggs can be seen over the head of Zacharias. At the top of the light is Rossetti's monogram. Under the picture is the Biblical reference, Exodus Ch X11 v 35.

"And the children of Israel did according to the word of Moses, and they borrowed of the Egyptians jewels of silver and jewels of gold and raiment". At the bottom are the words, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us".

"The right light of the window was designed by Mr. Frederick Shields, Rossetti's friend and represents Jesus healing the blind man outside the gates of Bethsaida."

In a letter to Christina Rossetti, Mr. Shields describes the window thus, "The moment is after our Lord has first touched the blind man's eyes and questions him if he sees ought – I desired in him to express the eager longing awakened by the partial gift of sight for perfect vision. Out of the city the Lord leads him upward – under the low arched street.

"Pharisee and disciple. The disciple attracted to the Lord – the Rabbi – warning him not to be led after a false Prophet – above his head, a camel – "ye blind guides that strain at a gnat and swallow a camel".

"By the side of the gate growling at the passing Saviour, a dog – emblem of unholy men – teachers and persecutions – suckling her litter of blind cubs – an echo of Spiritual blindness in which the children of this world are born – the thistle grows beside them. Over our Lord's head a flight of seven doves – the fullness of the Spirit. The Shepherd folding the sheep and

lambs – they flocking to him over the green pastures – lit by the light of the setting sun. The Lake of Galilee beyond – dotted with fishing craft and the crescent moon rising.

“A piece of pomegranate peel, a symbol of immortality can be seen and the doves escaping from the city to the light and liberty into which the blind man will emerge. Above the picture is Rossetti’s badge and motto, “Frangas non Flectas” – You shall break, you shall not bend.

“Under the picture is the Biblical reference, Saint Mark Chap V111 v.v. 22-23. “And He cometh to Bethsaida and they brought a blind man unto Him and brought Him to touch him. And He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town, and when He had spit on his eyes and put His hands upon him, He asked him if he saw ought”.

“At the bottom of the picture is “The Light Shineth in darkness”
Across both lights are the words “To the glory of God and in memory of my dear Son Gabriel Chas Dante Rossetti Born in London May 12 1828 Died at Birchington Easter Day 1882”.

In 1902 the Parish Church was broken into by two thieves who obtained entrance by breaking the lower light of the window. The Church boxes were stolen. The two thieves were captured by the energy of the local policeman. The window was repaired by Mr. Shields and William Rossetti.

Shortly after Rossetti died the bungalow – then named “Westcliffe” - was bought by Mr. F. Osbourne O’Hagen, a millionaire who changed its name to “Rossetti”. He made some alterations but the actual bungalow remained very much the same. He furnished the drawing room – Rossetti’s studio – with beautiful carpets and tapestries, valuable paintings, bronzes and priceless works of art. After Mr. O’Hagen’s death in 1930 his daughter, Miss Agnes Greenwood O’Hagen lived in the bungalow until her death in 1952.

In August 1952 the bungalow and site of approximately 1 acre were sold by public auction for £4,500, to be followed soon after by the sale of the furniture and effects.

A few years later the bungalow was pulled down and in 1966 the site was “developed” by the building of seven detached town houses.

During the First World War the bungalow was used as a Red Cross Hospital for wounded Servicemen, and an air raid shelter 65 deep was constructed under the length of the grounds from Rossetti Road to Beach Avenue. This shelter was used on occasions during the Second World War. During the occupation of Manston aerodrome by the U.S.A.F. during the Second World War part of the bungalow was occupied by the American C.O. Such is something of Rossetti and Birchington.

